Academic staff responses to student plagiarism in universities: A literature review from 1990 to 2019

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Maintaining academic integrity is important for today's institutions of higher learning and this involves academic staff responding to breaches by their students. Plagiarism by students (student plagiarism) continues to be an area of concern, especially with the use of the Internet to find, copy and, sometimes, pay for ready-made essays and assignments. This form of academic misconduct ultimately affects not only the students and academic staff, but also the reputation of the institution itself and the integrity of its awards. Despite the need for consistency in addressing student plagiarism, it appears that the responses of academic staff to student plagiarism remain varied and inconsistent. This paper seeks to systematically review the key findings from the literature over the past three decades on academic staff responses to student plagiarism in universities. Despite the research showing that academic staff appear to respond to student plagiarism in varied and inconsistent ways, the factors and reasons why they do so remain unclear. It is suggested that more research to better understand academic staff and their identities, perceptions and belief systems may help find workable solutions to address these inconsistencies.

Introduction

The background to this paper originates from a doctoral study which used mixed-methods research to explore the responses of academic staff from four public Western Australian universities to plagiarism by their students (De Maio, 2015). As academic integrity issues continue to impact on students, academics and, particularly, the reputation and integrity of the award systems of institutions, this paper is significant as it presents a review of three decades of research on such issues, with a focus on student plagiarism. However, there are limitations to this systematic review of the literature and it is not comprehensive. Being conducted as part of a doctoral study, it involved conducting in-depth desktop research of relevant studies on academic staff responses to student plagiarism with only papers published or translated into English being accessed and of which the institutions were mainly from Western or Anglophone countries. In addition, access to databases was limited to those that were available in the researchers' own institution. Further, the scope of this paper is limited to a review of the literature on the responses of academic staff to student plagiarism and not their underlying beliefs and perceptions of the issue.

The papers presented in this article were selected using university library databases, such as *Proquest* and *ScienceDirect*, and keywords such as 'faculty', 'academic staff', 'plagiarism', 'responses', 'university', 'college' and 'higher education'. Papers selected were limited to those which focused primarily on plagiarism as a form of academic misconduct in universities. In a total of 154 papers used in the doctoral study, it was found that only 11% of these focused on academic staff and their responses to student plagiarism in higher education. Instead, the majority of these papers, including the seminal work of McCabe and his colleagues, appeared to focus on students in universities and colleges, why they

cheat, and education and intervention strategies to help them avoid academic misconduct and plagiarism (McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino, 2003; McCabe & Trevino, 1997, 1993; McCabe, 1993), while others were directed to the institutions themselves and how they could develop clear policies, procedures or honour codes as a way of responding to student plagiarism (Bretag et al, 2011; Carroll, 2005). In contrast, there were fewer studies on academic staff themselves and their responses to plagiarism by students in higher education, and of these, most were not within the last 10-15 years. Those that have focused on academic staff responses to student plagiarism have found that academic staff seem to respond in inconsistent ways to occurrences of student plagiarism (Nadelson, 2007; Pickard, 2006; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Flint, Clegg & Macdonald, 2006; Barrett & Cox, 2005; Kelley & Bonner, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Simon, Carr, McCullough, Morgan, Oleson & Ressel, 2003; Keith-Speigel, Tabachnick, Whitley & Washburn, 1998; Burke, 1997; Sierup-Pincus, 1995; Ritter, 1993). This is of concern to institutions of higher learning as it will ultimately affect their reputations and the integrity of their award systems.

This paper endeavours to present a systematic review of the key findings from the available literature on academic staff responses to instances of student plagiarism published in the past three decades (1990-2019). It will show that, despite the amount of research on academic misconduct and plagiarism in higher education, academic staff responses to student plagiarism appear to remain varied, inconsistent and not aligned with the responses expected by their institutions, and that the reasons for such inconsistencies and the strategies adopted for addressing this issue remain unclear. At the outset, it should be acknowledged that the literature on student plagiarism is large and beyond the scope of this paper. What is presented here is a small cross-section of studies that have focused primarily on academic staff responses to plagiarism by students in universities and colleges, mainly those situated in Anglophone countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the studies presented in this paper focus on the responses of academic staff to student plagiarism, rather than on their underlying perceptions, beliefs or attitudes, as the latter concepts are difficult to investigate. However, at the conclusion of this paper, it will be evident that these matters need to be researched to gain a deeper understanding of academic staff responses. Every effort has been made to find all studies from 1990-2019 that focused primarily on academic staff responses to student plagiarism, in the hope that readers will be better informed on what has been found on this topic. The paper begins with a review of the literature on academic staff responses to student plagiarism, followed by research which has suggested the reasons for inconsistencies in academic staff responses to student plagiarism, and possible strategies which have been suggested to reduce such inconsistencies. The paper ends with a call for continuing research in this area, as it continues to remain an area of concern for institutions of higher learning.

Responses of academic staff to student plagiarism

Some of the earlier research on plagiarism by students in higher education appears to support the idea that academic staff tend to ignore issues of cheating and dishonesty by their students, or, at best, respond to them in an informal way and on a case-by-case basis

(Nadelson, 2007; Pickard, 2006; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Flint, Clegg & Macdonald, 2006; Barrett & Cox, 2005; Kelley & Bonner, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Simon, Carr, McCullough, Morgan, Oleson & Ressel, 2003; Keith-Speigel, Tabachnick, Whitley & Washburn, 1998; Burke, 1997; Sierup-Pincus, 1995; Ritter, 1993). This notion continues to be supported in part in more recent studies which refer to under-reporting or not reporting instances of student plagiarism, when academic staff are required to do so under institutional policies and procedures (Harper et al, 2018; De Maio, 2015; Li, 2013). And, despite the advent of online software programs, such as *Turnitin,* the introduction of institutional policies, procedures or honour codes (in the USA), and education and training of staff, this inconsistency in responses of academic staff to student plagiarism remains an issue of concern to universities, as it impacts on their reputations and the integrity of their awards.

An early study by Ritter (1993) suggested that academic staff will only follow institutional procedures for responding to student plagiarism where the plagiarism is considered serious and where there is some indication of an intention on the student's part to plagiarise. One of the limitations of her study was that she failed to define what was considered serious and intentional plagiarism. In his doctoral study, Burke (1997) suggested that faculty perceived the responsibility for not plagiarising rests solely with the student, hence the reasons for ignoring occurrences of academic misconduct by students. This early finding now appears to have been discredited to some extent in that plagiarism by students is now viewed as the responsibility of students, academic staff and institutions (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006; Carroll, 2005; Park, 2004). Lastly, Sierup-Pincus (1995) found that differences in the responses of staff towards academic misconduct could not be explained away by the gender, position, rank or tenure of the faculty member, nor the subjects or discipline area in which they teach. This finding was confirmed in her subsequent study where academic staff were asked to rate their responses to 28 different types of student cheating behaviours (Sierup-Pinkus & Schmelkin, 2003). Using multi-dimensional analysis (an analytical technique where related concepts are grouped together and presented in a spatial distribution), the results suggested that if definitions of cheating behaviours or academic dishonesty were provided by their institution, respondents would easily understand and respond accordingly. On the contrary, if there were ambiguous cheating behaviours for which no clear definition was provided, then faculty might respond in inconsistent ways to a particular cheating behaviour (Sierup-Pincus & Schmelkin, 2003).

Most research supports the notion that academic staff appear to respond to instances of student plagiarism in varied ways. In particular, studies suggest that academic staff respond to student plagiarism in most cases by either ignoring it or dealing with plagiarism autonomously and informally on a case-by-case basis, and, to a lesser extent, by reporting such incidences to the decision-makers or those higher in authority in their institution (Coren, 2012, 2006; Nadelson, 2007; Pickard, 2006; Flint, Clegg & Macdonald, 2006; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Barrett & Cox, 2005; Kelley & Bonner, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Simon et al., 2003).

Nadelson's (2007) study of nearly 300 faculty members at a large, public US university found that while academic staff suspected unethical behaviour of their students, only 40% of them actually responded to these incidents. After analysing the survey responses, she reached the conclusion that academic staff dealt with just under half of all suspected cases of academic dishonesty, and ignored the rest by either not proceeding through formal university channels for most cases, or preferring to deal with unethical behaviour informally.

The large-scale study by Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke (2006) of over 1200 students and 190 academic staff in four major universities in Queensland, Australia, revealed that almost 92% of students admitted to academic misconduct that was undetected by their lecturers and tutors. This result is alarming. How could it be that academic staff have inadvertently failed in most instances to detect student plagiarism? As the authors stated "[c]learly, if staff are disinclined to report suspected academic misconduct … then the probability that a student will be: (a) reported and (b) penalised for engaging in such activities is remote" (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006, p. 53).

A Western Australian study

The findings from a recent mixed-methods study of the responses of 225 academic staff to student plagiarism in four public universities in Western Australia concur with similar studies showing that responses to student plagiarism by academic staff appear to be inconsistent with each other and often not aligned with their institution's policy and procedures on student plagiarism. In an online survey, academics were asked to respond to three vignettes outlining three incidences of student plagiarism which differed in terms of the student involved, the type of plagiarism and amount of plagiarism. What was found was that when the student was a first-year undergraduate who had plagiarised a large amount of their assignment, only 35% of academic staff would report the incident to those higher in authority as required by institutional policy and procedures. Rather, most would respond in an informal way by allowing the student to resubmit their work. On the other hand, when the student was a third-year undergraduate who had plagiarised a small part of their assignment, most (70%) academic staff would report this incident to someone higher in authority - a response that is consistent with the response expected of them by their institution. For the postgraduate by coursework student who had plagiarised most of their paper, only 26% of academic would report the incident - a response expected of them by their university as set out in institutional policy and procedures on student plagiarism. Thus, for most of these incidences outlined in the three vignettes, academic staff responses would not be consistent or aligned with the responses expected of them by their institution (De Maio, 2015).

Even though not directly related to the matter of student plagiarism, the recent study by Harper and her colleagues (2018) on contract cheating is of relevance to this paper as their findings are similar to those from studies on academic staff responses to plagiarism. In a survey of over 1000 academic staff at 8 Australian universities, Harper and her colleagues found that most of the academic staff would not report incidences of contract cheating to the relevant decision-maker, nor enter the information into a database as required by their

institutions. A small minority of academic staff were even ignoring such incidences (Harper et al, 2018).

The findings from the above studies appear consistent, regardless of the decade in which the research was conducted, the types of academics and students involved, and the countries where the faculties, colleges or universities are situated. They show that while a small number of academic staff continue to ignore incidences of student plagiarism, others appear to respond in ways which are inconsistent or not aligned with the responses expected by their institutions, as outlined in policy and procedures on student plagiarism. This remains a cause for concern as non-alignment and inconsistency may affect the integrity of assessments, the validity of the degrees and qualifications awarded to students by their institutions, and diminish a culture of academic integrity which all institutions strive to uphold.

Reasons for inconsistent responses of academic staff

Various reasons have been suggested in the research to explain the inconsistencies in the responses of academic staff to student plagiarism. Findings from earlier studies suggest that the possible reasons as to why academic staff do not respond in consistent ways to incidences of student academic misconduct include: finding the issue time-consuming; stressful or too difficult; a lack of clarity or trust in institutional procedures; a lack of institutional support for dealing with the issue; a lack of evidence to proceed; fearing retaliation by students; or believing that the incident was not serious enough to warrant action (Keith-Speigel et al., 1998; Burke, 1997; Franklin-Stokes & Newstead, 1995; Kibler, 1994; Graham, Monday, O'Brien & Steffen, 1994). As will be seen later in this paper, these reasons are supported by some of the most recent studies (Harper et al., 2018; De Maio, 2015; Li, 2013).

Keith-Speigel and her colleagues (1998) examined the reasons why academic staff at US universities and colleges might have varied and inconsistent responses to plagiarism by their students. As a result of their study, a five-factor model was established as a plausible theory to explain such responses. The factors in this model were *Emotionality* (academics feel anxious and stressed about responding to student plagiarism), *Denial* (it is not a problem for academics but only for students), *Fear* (students might retaliate or bring action against the academic), *Guilt* and *Difficulty* (responding to plagiarism is time-consuming and involves a lot of resources not always available to the academic) (Keith-Speigel et al., 1998). The issue here is that it may be difficult to place the myriad of reasons for why academic staff respond in diverse ways into these five, neat categories and even the researchers themselves acknowledge that it is difficult to categorise academic staff responses to student plagiarism into such distinct groups as some reasons may fall under more than one category.

In their survey of nearly 500 faculty in a mid-sized US institution, Simon and his colleagues used organisational culture theory to explain that universities are "loosely-coupled organisations shaped by administrators, faculty and students where each appears to operate independently of the others" (2003, p.196), and the more disconnected each of

these parties feels to the institution, the greater the likelihood that they would follow their own individual practices rather than those set out by the universities. They wanted to test two hypotheses: firstly, that faculty who are confident in the institution are more likely to use formal processes for dealing with academic dishonesty than those who are sceptical of such processes; and secondly, that female instructors are less likely than their male counterparts to use formal processes for dealing with suspected academic dishonesty. Both their hypotheses were proved - if faculty members were trusting of their institution, they were more likely to follow the formal institutional processes for dealing with academic dishonesty.

In addition, they found that that female faculty members were less trusting than their male counterparts and that this "stark gender difference in terms of institutional confidence" was statistically significant (Simon et al., 2003, p.199). This difference they suggest is because most female faculty feel marginalised from the culture of the university - often they are junior faculty members who are outnumbered by more senior, usually male, counterparts. However, this finding appears in conflict with the later study by Seirup-Pincus and Schmelkin (2003) which suggested that gender, age or other demographics did not significantly influence responses. The research by Simon and his colleagues indicated that there are two ways the instructor can deal with academic dishonesty - either through the university's formal channels or informally through classroom-based techniques (Simon et al., 2003). They suggested that academic staff will deal with the issue in a way where they feel more powerful and, in most instances, this is when they are in the classroom and independent of outside influences (Simon et al., 2003, p.197).

Similarly, Nadelson (2007) stated that faculty who felt uncomfortable or anxious about using the formal channels due to believing they lacked evidence to proceed, or those who felt anxious about reporting cases to administrators, or those who seemed to mistrust those in authority or administration, would not report incidences of student plagiarism through formal means as required by their institution.

Some of the reasons found in the first researcher's doctoral study on the reasons why academic staff at four public West Australian universities respond to student plagiarism in the ways they do include: the belief that academic staff had some degree of discretion for responding; finding the process of responding time-consuming; feeling stressed and overworked; having their responses being ignored or overturned by those higher in authority; lacking trust or being sceptical about institutional processes; lacking support from the university; and thinking about their academic reputation and how responding might affect this (De Maio, 2015).

Glendinning (2014) alluded to the point that academic staff in European institutions of higher learning may not always follow policies and procedures for responding to student plagiarism, because "of coercion and intimidation by academic colleagues, asking them to drop cases of plagiarism or be softer in their approach" (2014, p.17). However, she stated that the greatest impediments to progress in academic integrity across the EU are "the lack of consensus over what constitutes plagiarism, differences in academic standards, expectations of academic tutors and educational priorities" (2014, p.18).

Harper and her colleagues (2018) also found similar reasons when studying the responses of academic staff to contract cheating by their students. Their findings indicated that academic staff fail to respond to contract cheating because they feel they do not have enough evidence to substantiate their claims; are not familiar with university processes for responding to such academic misconduct; or feel that they lack institutional support. In addition, they found that lenient penalties for contract cheating was another reason why academic staff did not report such incidences (Harper et al., 2018). Interestingly, their respondents mentioned other reasons why they felt inadequate in responding to incidences of contract cheating as "practical conditions of teaching, specifically workload for teaching, staff-student contact time and class sizes… [and]…performance review and reward environment, including recognition and reward, performance management, and student evaluations of teaching, which may serve as a disincentive to actively address and report breaches such as contract cheating" (Harper et al., 2018, p.13).

Improving consistency in academic staff responses

What of the future? Higher education is changing with decreased job security and more sessional or contract work for academics, larger class sizes, even online classes which may make responding to student plagiarism more difficult.

In response to growing concern about student plagiarism, some researchers stress the importance of having clear and transparent policies and procedures for responding to student plagiarism (Bretag et al., 2011; Howard, 2007). They have stressed that these policies and procedures must be easy to follow. In support, the first researcher's doctoral study sampling over 200 academic staff from four public Western Australian universities found that although the majority of academic staff agreed that their university's policy on student plagiarism was fair (89%) and easy to understand (81%); fewer agreed that the procedures for responding to student plagiarism were easy to follow (67%) or practical to implement (53%), with over half of the respondents (53%) finding such procedures time-consuming (De Maio, 2015). These results go some way to explaining why academic staff responses to incidences of student plagiarism will not always align with the responses expected of them by their institution. Policies and procedures for responding to student plagiarism are still written in legalistic language (Sutherland-Smith, 2010) and more needs to be done to make these documents accessible to academic staff.

In Australia, all public universities have in place such policies and procedures; however, as the literature outlined above has indicated, these documents are not always adhered to and there is still concern that penalties are not applied consistently. For example, the *Amber Project* looked at the ranges and types of penalties available for responding to academic misconduct in over 160 universities in the UK. They found that even though two-thirds of these institutions had clear procedures, the range of penalties varied between and even within institutions and that institutions differed in how much guidance was given when applying penalties. For example, 86% of universities provided advice, but of these only 76% made explicit the types of factors that should be considered when applying penalties (Tennant, Rowell & Duggan, 2007).

Other viable solutions to address inconsistencies in academic staff responses to student plagiarism have been suggested by researchers. These include having academic staff share information and beliefs about student plagiarism; introducing specialist officers; and restricting the number of penalties that can be chosen (Carroll & Appleton, 2005). Other solutions involve asking academic staff to apply pedagogical strategies such as teaching research and referencing skills to their students to help them avoid plagiarism (Carroll, 2007; Dawson, 2004; Harris, 2001). However, these strategies are only as effective as the ability of the academic staff themselves to teach them and they do little to help the academic staff become consistent in responding to student plagiarism. Carroll & Appleton (2005) suggested academic staff share information and beliefs about student plagiarism. Borg (2009) called for many definitions of plagiarism to be accepted, while Glendinning (2014) spoke of the need for more consensus on what constitutes plagiarism, and for the lessening of any differences in academic staff standards and expectations of their students through education. It is agreed that a clear definition of plagiarism contained in policies and procedures on student plagiarism is a good start; however, more needs to be done. As suggested by most researchers (Li, 2013; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Carroll, 2005; Park, 2004), continued emphasis should be placed on ensuring a holistic, institution-wide approach to responding to student plagiarism, wherein an environment of academic integrity and ethics becomes the accepted norm.

Discussion

A systematic review of the literature on academic staff responses to student plagiarism from the past three decades (1990-2019) reveals some issues which continue to be problematic for universities. Findings from many studies show that, despite increased awareness and education around academic integrity issues, it appears that academic staff continue to respond to incidences of student plagiarism in inconsistent ways which are not always aligned to the responses expected of them by their university, as evidenced in institutional policies and procedures (De Maio, 2015; Nadelson, 2007; Pickard, 2006; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke, 2006; Flint, Clegg & Macdonald, 2006; Barrett & Cox, 2005; Kelley & Bonner, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Simon et al., 2003; Keith-Speigel et al., 1998; Burke, 1997; Sierup-Pincus, 1995; Ritter, 1993). The reasons given for such inconsistencies by academic staff are varied and include finding responding to the issue time-consuming; stressful or too difficult; finding institutional procedures for responding to student plagiarism unclear or mistrusting them; lacking institutional support; feeling they do not have enough evidence to proceed; or believing the incident to be too minor to warrant action; and fearing retaliation by students. As can be seen, most of these reasons outlined relate to the institution and its procedures for responding to the issue. Thus, the onus should be on the institution to find ways to educate and support their academic staff to encourage consistency in their responses. More effective strategies, in addition to those mentioned by the literature discussed, should be explored as, despite the focus of current studies being on contract cheating, the issue of student plagiarism continues to remain an area of concern.

Inconsistency and non-alignment impact universities in many ways, and, most importantly, adversely affect their reputations and the integrity of their award systems.

Responding to student plagiarism in ways which are not aligned to institutional policies and procedures affects all stakeholders, particularly students, who may view such inconsistencies as meaning there is no culture of academic integrity within their university, despite the appearance of a value system where integrity and fairness are promoted and maintained.

Conclusion

Student plagiarism, as a form of academic misconduct, is an issue that affects students, academics and institutions alike. For institutions, the repercussions of not effectively addressing student academic misconduct ultimately impacts on their reputation and the integrity of their awards. The studies outlined in this paper suggest that, despite universities having in place a combination of policies and procedures, honour codes, or education and training strategies for their staff, responses of their academic staff to issues of student plagiarism appear to remain varied, inconsistent and non-aligned and this is a real matter of concern for universities. Although reasons have been suggested by the literature to explain why academic staff seem to respond in such ways to incidences of student plagiarism, and strategies have been suggested that might help reduce such inconsistencies, there is still a pressing need for further research in this area which explores the underlying beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, morals and ethics of academic staff.

This can only be done effectively if research is conducted by multidisciplinary teams who can present a more comprehensive picture of why academic staff might respond inconsistently to academic integrity issues within universities. Although student plagiarism cannot be completely eradicated, more research is required to explore effective strategies and best practices which can educate academic staff on the importance of the issue, and the need to be consistent in responding. This will help promote and maintain the values of integrity and fairness which are essential in modern higher education institutions.

Responding to student plagiarism in consistent ways is crucial in any institution of higher learning that seeks to uphold values of integrity and fairness, and maintain a culture of academic integrity. Inconsistent responses by academic staff who work at such institutions have detrimental effects on the reputation of the institution and the integrity of their award systems. Despite the many studies on academic staff responses to academic integrity issues, student plagiarism remains an area of concern, so there remains a need for continuing the research in this area. Only when we understand more deeply the people who respond to academic misconduct, can we know best how to consistently and effectively address the issue of student plagiarism in universities.

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